



Death. Digital image. Flickr. Web. 11 June 2011.

SUICIDE (SUICIDIUM): THE ACT OF KILLING ONESELF

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Asian Studies

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Question: What accounts for the exceptionally high rate of suicide in the three countries: the Republic of Korea, Japan and China?



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INTRODUCTION:

Suicide - a global mental health problem - has become a critical issue in the three East Asian countries: the Republic of Korea, China and Japan. Although the three have grown exponentially over the past few decades, their swift gain to financial power and prosperity has led to substantial rates of suicide compared to those who have gained economic prosperity more steadily (i.e: Singapore). China reports a whopping rate of 23.1 % (27.1 million) of their population, Korea, the first in all 30 OECD (Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development) reports a staggering 28.1% (13.43 million) rate and Japan, 23.8% (30.5 million), (Shah A.)

In general terms, the causes for suicide in each nation are unique; while in some countries many become depressed due to the dreadful weather, in others, it stems from peer pressure, bullying and financial problems. However, referring to multiple research papers, I have identified suicidal factors that are most prevalent in East Asia: grades/education,



Smiley Faces. Digital image. *Creative Commons.* Web. 11 June 2011.

peer pressure, unemployment and financial insecurity.

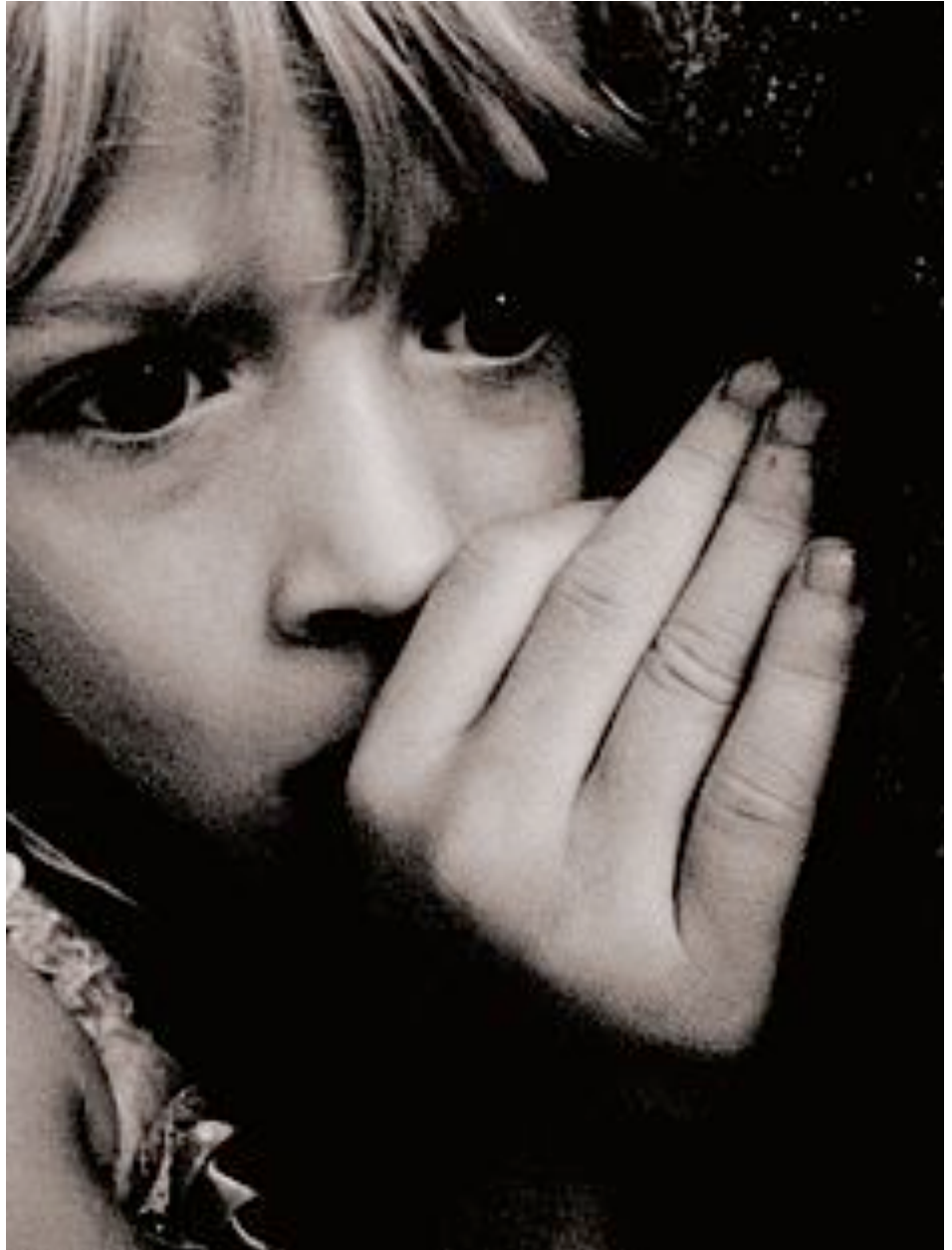
Reading about the domino effect suicides at KAIST (Korea Advanced Institute of Science and Technology) has surely sparked my interest in the socio - economic factors, cultural and religious factors that contribute to suicide. The [article](#) in particular identified peer-pressure, grades, failures to meet the expectation of one's parents and financial problems as the main causes for the deaths of the students. Looking back on our society, I realize that I have encountered many accounts of suicides over the years -mostly by grades and education - on the news.

It strikes to me as odd that Korea, a highly developed nation, has lost so many talented and bright young minds over the decades from the belief that they haven't been able to achieve their best and impress their peers. In a world where one's education, salary and job is regarded as the highest point of accomplishment in one's life, it doesn't come as a surprise that this leads to incredible degrees of stress and emotional instability.

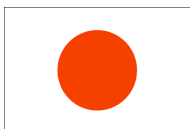
Hence, this paper is designed to explore the social and cultural aspects, unique to the three countries, that contribute to the exponentially increasing rates of suicide in the three countries.

In this paper, I will address the causes for suicide in each nation, introduce statistics collected by the World Health Organization (WHO) on official counts of deaths, a survey by myself on a group of KIS students and

analyze a cause-effect relationship between East Asian culture and how it affects suicide rates in Korea, China and Japan.



Scared Child at Night Time. Digital image. Wikipedia. Web. 11 June 2011.



JAPAN.

9th highest in the world. 1st in female suicides in the G8 nations. Correlated to high unemployment rates. Depression. Social pressure. Economic distress. Most frequently in: Mount Fuji, railroad tracks.



KOREA.

1st in the 30 OECD countries. Tremendously competitive in academics. Lots of emphasis given to one's alma mater. KAIASST Suicide 2011. Roh Muh Hyun (former president). Daul Kim (Super Model). Ahn Jae-Hwan (Actor). Suicide by cyber-bullying.



CHINA

Highest female suicide rate in the world. Horrendous working conditions. Chinese, Confucius Ideals: *"it may happen that they have to accept death in order to have ren accomplished"*

AT KIS:

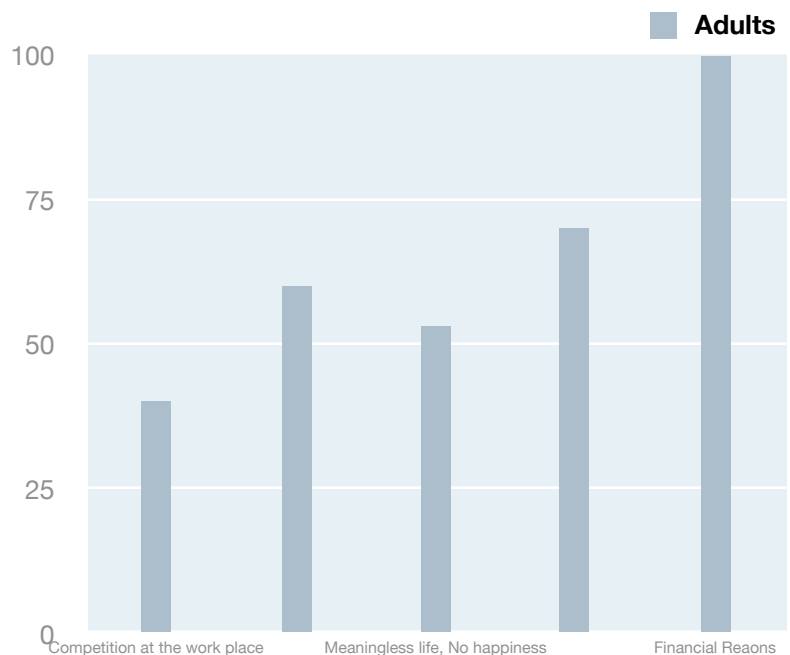
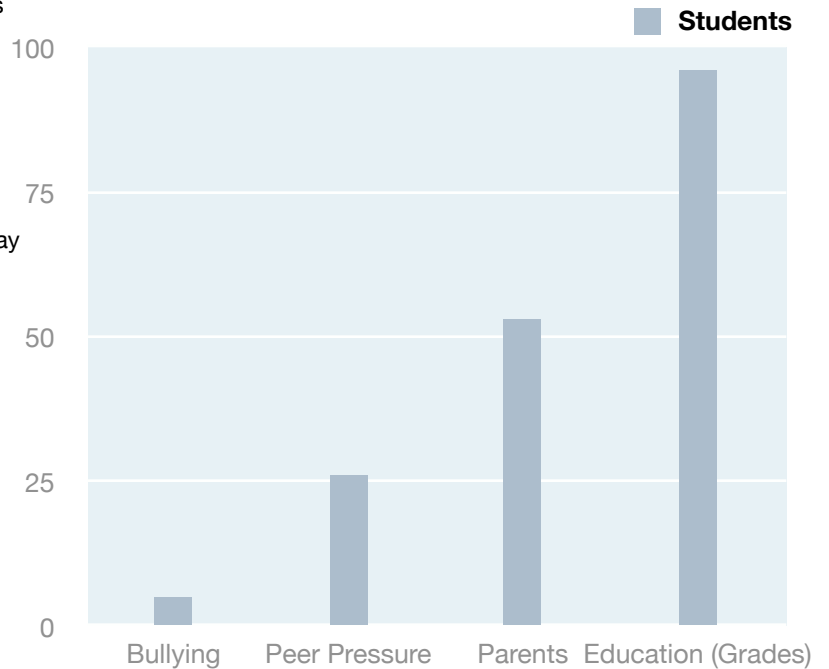
In order to take a grasp at what might be potential social, cultural or financial causes that might lead to one's death, I surveyed a sample of 30 students at KIS.

It was interesting to note that 100% of the students replied that at least one of the causes for suicide must be education (grades) or financial reasons for students or adults, respectively.

As one student stated, "The first thing that comes to mind from the word "suicide" for students is grades. Grades - although not the most important aspect of life - determine one's future, thus determining your life later in the future". Many replied in the same way and believed that those who could not meet up to the

standards of themselves, their parents or their peers had no choice but to turn to death.

While for suicides in adults, the students believed that the single most important factor was due to financial reasons: not being able to support a family was believed to lead to extreme pressure and tension among the household.



SUICIDE IN EAST ASIA

Abstract

Suicide is a major global mental health issue that is widely found in East Asia. A few countries in particular, the Republic of **Korea**, **Japan** and **China** are known to be one of the most populous countries while having the highest suicide rates in the world.

Looking at the big picture, approximately one million individuals are lost each year through suicide, ten to twenty million attempt the act and fifty to a hundred and twenty million are affected by the death of a relative or a friend. Among these astonishing rates, Asia accounts for sixty percent of the suicides. And yet, Asia has received relatively less attention to the problem in comparison to Europe and North America. Although a significant portion of the suicides result from mental illnesses, many cultural and social pressure, religious sanctions come into play as well as the lack of resources. In particular, in China, many of the suicides result from Confucianist ideals that stretch the importance of death to achieve *rin*". Hence, governmental actions to prevent suicide has deemed ineffective thus far. (Vijayakumar et al., 2005a; Vijayakumar et al., 2005b;).

Efforts to solve and prevent the problem have been attempted at the past by the World Health Organization (WHO), Suicide Prevention International (SPI) and Strategies to Prevent Suicide (STOPS) in the past, but not have been able to prove themselves truly effective.

Main causes of suicide in East Asia

A spectrum of causes for suicide in East Asia exists, however, the main causes are socio-economic, cultural or religious. As a general rule of thumb, the more prosperous countries have been reported to have higher suicide rates than those that are poor.

a) Economic factors



Economic prosperity of a country is determined by many factors: GDP, literacy, education levels, trade and standard of living, according to the United Nations Development Program founded in 2006. Among the countries that are rated on this scale, Australia is ranked the highest and Pakistan, the lowest. The graphs also report that suicide rates are higher in countries that have achieved

A man in poverty lies on the streets of Korea, begging for money. Poverty is one of the leading causes of suicide in Korea and China.

economic prosperity more rapidly (the Republic of Korea, China, Japan) than those who have economically developed more gradually (Singapore, Taiwan). For example, **Korea's** suicide rate has increased by over 400% over the last 20 years (33, OECD).

EPIDEMIOLOGY OF SUICIDE						
COUNTRY	POPULATION	TOTAL RATE PER 100,000	MALE	FEMALE	MALE:FEMALE	AGE GROUP
China	1.3 billion	20.8%	20.7%	25.9%	0.8:1.0	Young Adults
China, Hong Kong SAR	7. billion	15.3%	20.1%	10.9%	1.8:1.0	Young adults, Older adults
Japan	128.0 million	23.8%	35.2%	12.8%	2.8:1.00	Adults (50-65+)
Republic of Korea (The)	47.8 million	28.1%	34.9%	\$17.3	2.0:1.0	Young Adults

All three countries had unique characteristics concerning suicide. Among the three countries: China has the highest female to male suicide rate. In Japan, the age group with the highest rate of suicide was found in adults and the Republic of Korea had the highest overall rate in among the three countries and second worldwide. Data: http://www.who.int/mental_health/prevention/suicide/country_reports/en/index.html

b) Cultural factors

China has the highest female to male suicide ratio. As shown in the table above, the rate is 0.8 to 1.0. Chinese culture stress the importance of a patriarchal society, hence, women - especially in rural areas- do not receive any rights. In many areas of China, women are abused by their spouse and many complain of an unhappy marriage (35, OECD). Japan and Korea where common hanging or jumping off from high heights takes place, in China, suicide most commonly occurs by inhaling pesticides. In rural areas, pesticide is easy to obtain and with the dismal conditions as well as the mistreatment of women, the women in rural areas easily tend to commit suicide by inhaling the lethal pesticides.

In **Japan** and **Korea**, the pressure to do well on exams and grades highly contribute to the causes of suicide. Failure to do so associates with shame and peer pressure that often leads to depression among college, high school, or even middle school students. With students competing for limited places in university, failure to achieve high grades has resulted in students committing suicide. A relevant incident happened in Korea in 2011. Students at the highly prestigious KAIST (Korea Advanced Institute of Science and Technology) university in Korea jumped to their deaths after their failure to achieve high grades, disqualifying them to renew their scholarship of \$300 dollars.

Most interestingly - although it remains a minority of the suicides - they are, even in contemporary society, socially and culturally accepted in some regions of **China** and **Japan**. In China, relieving oneself from pain by suicide is regarded as a sympathetic action, and in Japan, *harakiri* is practiced to restore honor (Seppuku). Additionally, in the latter country, Shinjū (a suicide pact), is also commonly practiced. These plans are written to die together, or separately at a similar time among friends, families, gang groups or lovers. In 1703, a play named “The Love Suicides at Sonezaki” was written about a double suicide between a couple. Since then, many religions have followed suit (Japanese Performing Arts Resource Center).

The **Japanese** are also known for their kamikaze and kaiten, seppuku, suicide planes, suicide warriors and ritual suicide, respectively. Although the first two took place during the Imperial years of the Imperial Japanese military, many Japanese glorify them for their brave and gallant feats. Seppuku, ritual suicide still place in contemporary Japanese society, even today. Being a part of the samurai’s bushido (code of conduct), it requires a samurai to disembowelment themselves if, in the case they lose their honor.



A ritual seppuku taking place (May, Nicks).

In a recent case, Toshikastu Matsuoka, the Minister of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries practiced seppuku after he was involved in a scandal. Many regard his death as “honorable”, “a true samurai”, and such. The way how ritual suicide is looked upon as honorable and glorious poses as a significant problem to the mindset towards suicide in Japan (May, Nicks).

c) Jobs

In all three countries, suicide is linked with jobs: pressure at the work place, unemployment, stress from bosses and low pay. However, suicide from horrible working conditions is a major factor seen only in **China**.

Most famously, 14 workers at Foxconn (Chinese Apple factories) committed suicide in the course of sixteen months (Technology News).

d) Religious factors

Many religions: Buddhism, Christianity, Catholicism, Islam, Muslim, etc. forbid suicide. Hence, countries that are predominantly Christian or Catholic have a relatively low suicide rate. However, the case stands as an *exception* for the three Buddhist countries: **the Republic of Korea, China and Japan** (Collings SCD).



For example, an excerpt below from one of Confucius's teachings says: for one to achieve *ren* (one of the five main Confucian principles), one must be able to sacrifice anything, even in **life**.

*"Life is what I want; yi is also what I want. If I cannot have both, I would **rather take yi than life**. On the one hand, though life is what I*

A buddhist monk committing ritual suicide in China. As shown, religious and cultural are major factors that induce people to commit suicide.

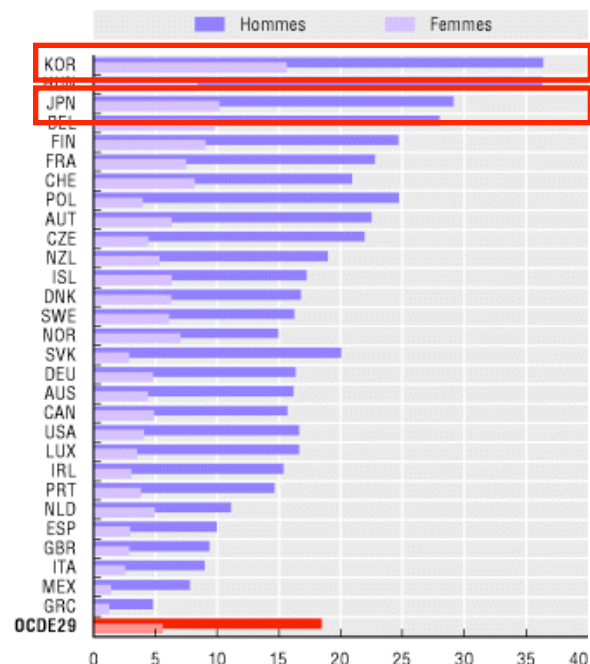
want, there is **something I want more than life**. That is why I do not **cling to life at all cost**. Yet there are ways of remaining alive and ways of avoiding death to which a person will not resort. In other words, there are things a person wants more than life and there are also things he or she loathes more than death." (Mencius).

Summary and Conclusion

From my research, I have concluded that suicide takes place for a variety of different reasons, may it be cultural, social or economical.

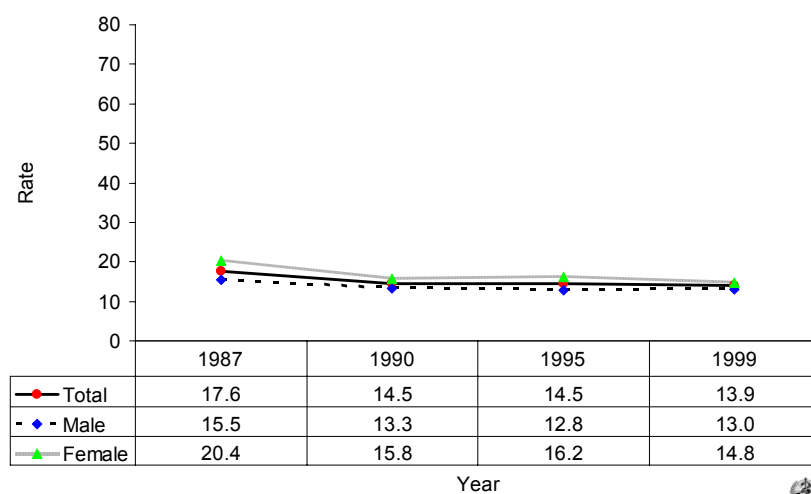
However, the biggest problem of suicide in East Asia lies in that the government does not take direct measures nor control to prevent suicides.

Additionally, governments from all three countries do not conduct studies or publish reports on suicide. Although European countries and the United States have been able to control the suicides to a degree with active federal funding, such results cannot be accomplished in East Asia because such studies are highly looked down upon. An example in case takes place in **China** where the government manipulates the data of suicide rates of the respective country. The suicide rates in China are noted to be on par with Japan and Korea, however, because they alter the data, accurate results cannot be achieved. Hence, in the graph above, Korea ranks first and Japan third while China cannot be seen at all, implying that the rate is lower than 0 - 5%.



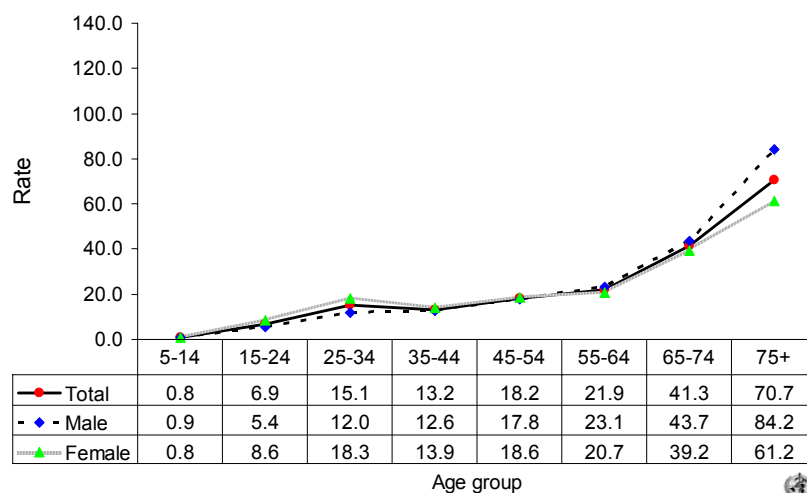
Suicide rates (per 100,000), by gender, China

(mainland, selected rural and urban areas*), 1987-1999.



Suicide rates (per 100,000), by gender and age, China

(mainland, selected rural and urban areas*), 1999.



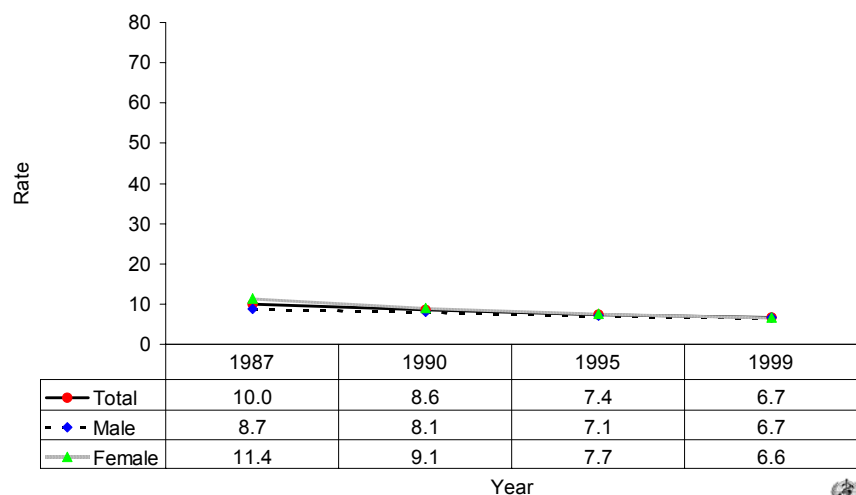
Number of suicides by age group and gender. CHINA

(mainland, selected rural and urban areas*), 1999.

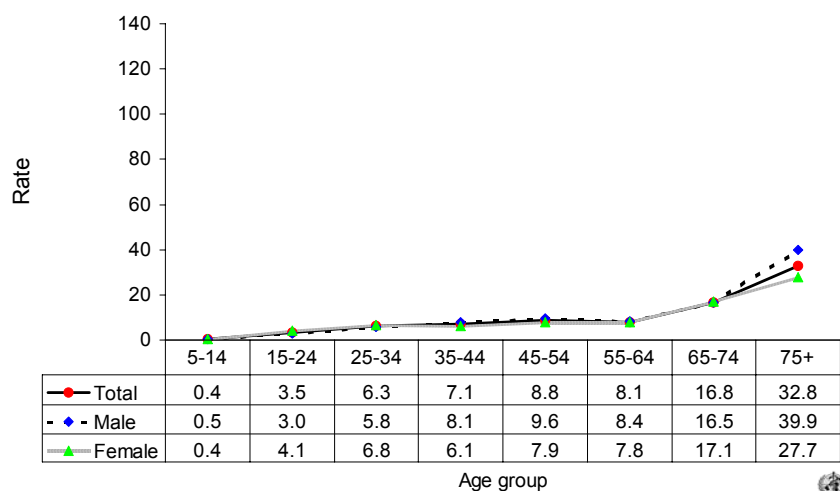
Age (years)	5-14	15-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65-74	75+	All
Males	83	626	1357	1287	1196	1165	1325	1009	8048
Females	64	915	1937	1351	1186	1017	1273	1045	8788
Total	147	1541	3294	2638	2382	2182	2598	2054	16836

*representing less than 10% of all deaths occurring in the country

Suicide rates (per 100,000), by gender, China
(mainland, selected urban areas), 1987-1999.



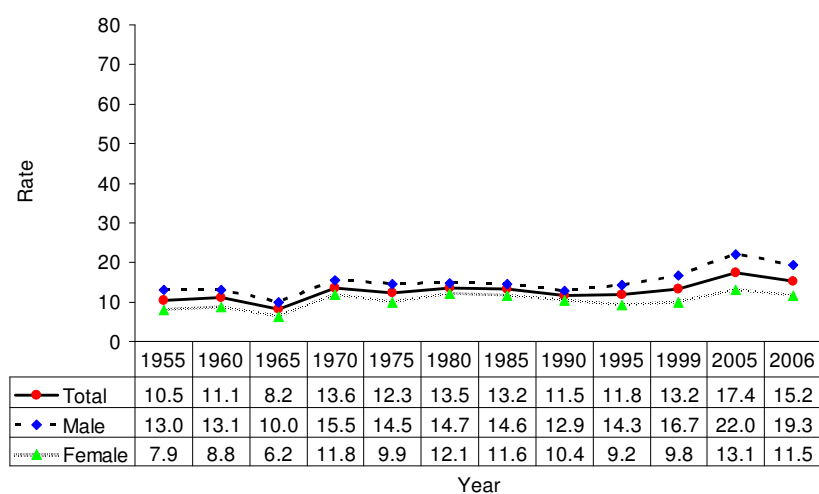
Suicide rates (per 100,000), by gender and age, China
(mainland, selected urban areas), 1999.



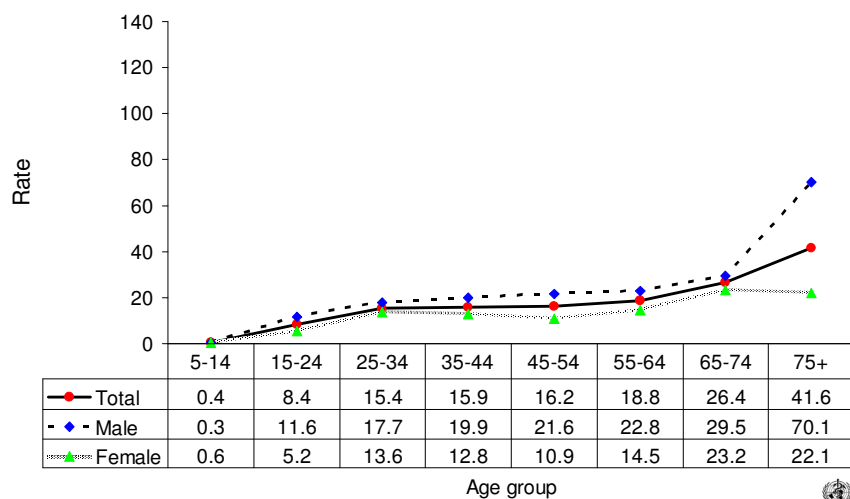
Number of suicides by age group and gender. CHINA (mainland, selected urban areas), 1999.

Age (years)	5-14	15-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65-74	75+	All
Males	19	180	377	504	374	247	298	266	2265
Females	17	216	408	362	300	229	324	260	2116
Total	36	396	785	866	674	476	622	526	4381

Suicide rates (per 100,000), by gender, China,
Hong Kong SAR, 1955 -2006.



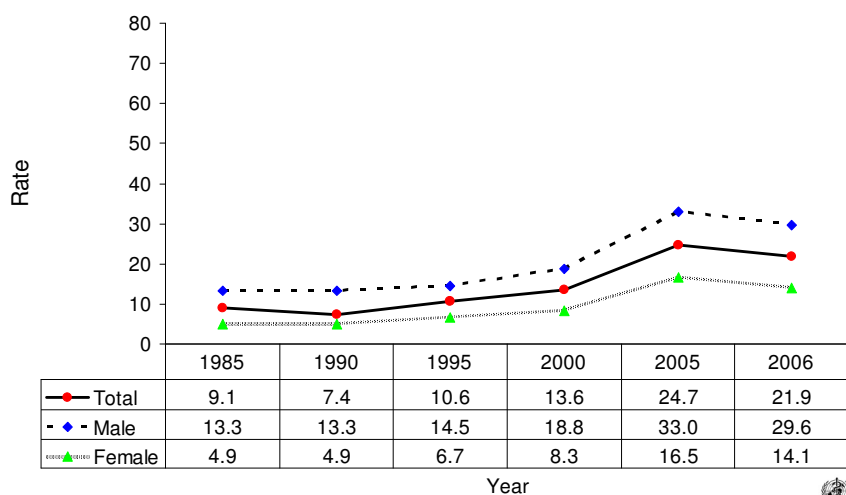
Suicide rates (per 100,000), by gender and age, China,
Hong Kong SAR, 2006.



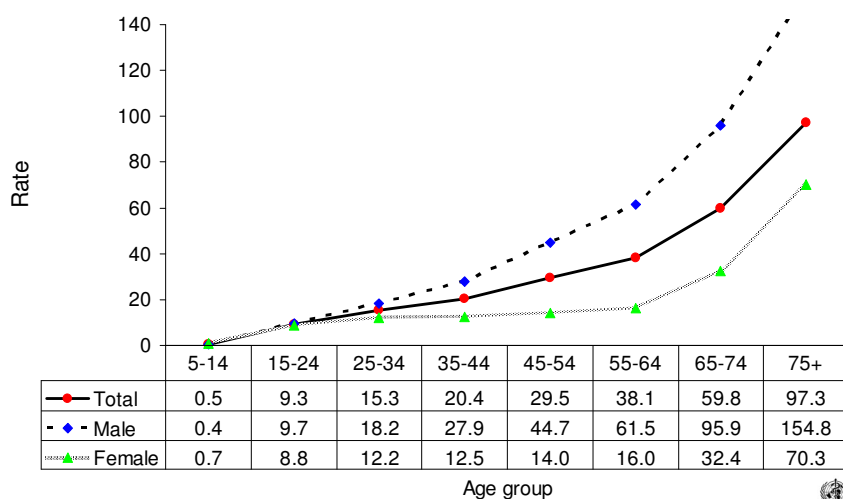
Number of suicides by age group and gender. CHINA, HONG KONG SAR,
2006.

Age (years)	5-14	15-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65-74	75+	All
Males	1	52	82	110	127	78	70	109	630
Females	2	24	80	89	66	47	54	50	412
Total	3	76	162	199	193	125	124	159	1042

Suicide rates (per 100,000), by gender,
Republic of Korea, 1985-2006.



Suicide rates (per 100,000), by gender and age,
Republic of Korea, 2006.



Number of suicides by age group and gender. REPUBLIC of KOREA, 2006.

Age (years)	5-14	15-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65-74	75+	All
Males	15	342	765	1245	1639	1288	1232	723	7249
Females	21	286	492	535	505	352	548	700	3439
Total	36	628	1257	1780	2144	1640	1780	1423	10688

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2. *Man in Poverty*. Digital image. *Egloos*. Web. 11 June 2011.
3. *Scared Child at Night Time*. Digital image. *Wikipedia*. Web. 11 June 2011.
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